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The U.S.–ROK Alliance: Building a Mature Partnership

by James J. Przystup and Kang Choi

About this report

This report presents two views on the alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea and its future. It was prepared as a part of an ongoing dialogue between the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University and the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses. In the first contribution, James Przystup looks at the implications of American military transformation for security on the Korean Peninsula and the alliance. In the second, Kang Choi presents a South Korean roadmap to a mature and comprehensive security alliance. Both recognize the need for the U.S. and Republic of Korea (ROK) governments to articulate a common strategic vision that would adapt the alliance to an increasingly complicated security environment, reflect a more mature partnership, and develop a regional and global orientation.

The U.S.–ROK alliance, a pillar of East Asia security for more than 50 years, is faced with a complex set of challenges that will test its continuing relevance. The attacks of September 11 and the American commitment to wage a global war on terrorism have accelerated the transformation of the U.S. military from a static Cold War defense posture to a globally deployable and employable strike force. Meanwhile, on the Korean Peninsula, the threat posed by North Korea has become more dangerous as its nuclear challenge has become manifest. In South Korea, a new generation has come into political power over the past decade, and a generational fault line now divides the country on issues related to North Korea and relations with the United States. In this context, transforming the Armed Forces and the U.S. military presence globally and on the Korean Peninsula will require significant restructuring of

alliance roles and missions. The challenge to the two partners is either to adapt to new realities or watch the alliance wither away.

Przystup contends that transformation of the U.S. military will leave a less intrusive American presence in South Korea, with enhanced capabilities to deter a range of threats from the North. U.S.-led transformation can maintain alliance solidarity and make the relationship more equitable, sustainable, and better able to undertake bilateral security cooperation off the peninsula. Achievement of this outcome requires commitment to the Future of the Alliance Policy Initiative and development of a strategic vision for the U.S. presence across the Asia-Pacific region over the next decade.

Choi argues that the alliance should not be confined to deterrence of North Korea but should evolve in ways that will allow it to deal with a range of new security challenges on and off the peninsula and contribute to promotion of common values. He sees the need to articulate a common U.S.–ROK strategic vision for the future of the alliance and to develop appropriate new military plans. To take on more responsibility, South Korea needs to enhance air and naval capabilities and to develop lighter and more mobile ground forces. Choi also urges that U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula be restructured to deal with a range of regional contingencies, while their relocation should proceed in close consultation with their South Korean allies to avoid raising political anxiety about a lessened U.S. commitment.

—Stephen J. Flanagan
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Focus on Korea

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Military Transformation: Enhancing Capabilities and Commitment

by James J. Przystup

In thinking about the future direction of the alliance between the United States and South Korea, one needs to start in the past. For in this case, the past is truly prologue.

More than a decade ago, as President George H.W. Bush came into office, structural changes in the security landscape of Asia were becoming manifest. The Cold War was winding down. Congress and the American public were looking for returns on the “peace dividend.” There was a clear expectation that cuts would be coming across the board—and in Asia, these cuts would begin with the Korean Peninsula.

To anticipate change, the Bush administration in 1990 launched the East Asia Strategy Initiative, which laid out a 10-year, 3-stage plan for force reduction and modernization in the Asia-Pacific region. It previewed a shift from large permanent basing, such as the U.S. presence at Clark Air Force Base and Subic Bay in the Philippines, toward greater reliance upon access arrangements across the region, the first being with Singapore in 1990. The Commander, U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Charles Larsen, defined this aspect of transformation as a “places, not bases” strategy. In November 1991, however, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney put the plan on hold because of the emergence of the North Korean nuclear threat.

Now, yet again, the United States and its allies face a transitional moment. The September 11 attacks have refocused attention on new threats emanating from Eurasia’s southern periphery. Pressures are rising to realign and transform U.S. forces. In response, President George W. Bush has moved to transform the U.S. military to enable it to meet the threats of the new era.

What do these developments imply for the Korean Peninsula, for the U.S.–ROK alliance, and for the stability and security of the Asia-Pacific region? Initial answers can

best be developed from an understanding of the strategic vision of the Bush administration as embodied in its two seminal planning documents: *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* and the *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Report*.

America’s Strategy

The National Security Strategy, issued by the Bush administration in September 2002, defines the defense of the United States as the “first and fundamental” commitment of the American government.¹ At the same time, the strategy postulates that the task of defending the United States has “changed dramatically.” Today, the threats come from “terrorists of global reach” and the proliferation of

U.S. strategy requires that adversaries be defeated “swiftly and decisively” while protecting the American homeland

weapons of mass destruction. The document goes on to note that, prior to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Afghanistan was “low on the list of major planning contingencies.” The lesson of Afghanistan, however, is that the United States “must prepare for more such deployments” and as part of that preparation must develop “transformed maneuver and expeditionary forces.”

Transformation is at the core of the *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, issued September 2001, and transformation remains the central driving force of defense planning. And, in the foreword to the *Transformation*

Planning Guidance, issued in April 2003, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld wrote: *Some believe that with the United States in the midst of a dangerous war on terrorism, now is not the time to transform our armed forces. I believe that the opposite is true. Now is precisely the time to make changes. The war on terrorism is a transformational event that cries out for us to rethink our activities and to put that new thinking into action.*

The guidance makes the following key points:

- The United States “cannot afford to react to threats slowly or have large forces tied down for lengthy periods.” One lesson of history is that “merely attempting to hold on to existing advantages is a shortsighted approach and may prove disastrous.”
- U.S. strategy “requires transformed forces that can take action from a forward position and rapidly reinforce from other areas.”
- U.S. strategy also requires that adversaries be defeated “swiftly and decisively” while protecting the American homeland.
- Transformed forces are essential “for deterring conflict, dissuading adversaries, and assuring our commitment to a peaceful world.”²

Earlier, at the end of September 2001, the *QDR Report* defined the overriding programmatic objective of transformation as the development of joint forces that “must be lighter, more lethal and maneuverable . . . more readily deployable and employed in an integrated fashion.” U.S. forces must not only be capable of “distributed and dispersed operations, but also able to force entry in anti-access or area-denial environments.”³

The deployments of the Cold War era, concentrated in Western Europe and Northeast Asia, were found to be “inadequate for the new strategic environment, in which U.S. interests are global and potential threats in other areas of the world are emerging.” This judgment has generated a search for “additional bases and stations” beyond Western Europe and Northeast Asia because in the post-September 11 world, the United States will no longer be able to develop forces to deal with “a specific adversary in a specific geographical area” but will have to anticipate dealing with “unexpected crises against opponents with a wide-range of capabilities.”⁴

Thus, transformation shifts force planning from “optimizing” for conflicts in

Restructuring the Alliance for Regional and Global Challenges

by Kang Choi

As the Northeast Asian security environment and strategic landscape change, new issues and challenges appear. For the alliance between the Republic of Korea and the United States, this means that adjustment is both necessary and desirable.

As a response to the inconclusive outcome of the Korean War, the alliance has served its objectives—peace and security in the Pacific area—well for the past five decades, and it will do so into the future. While the threats posed by North Korea, the primary rationale for the security alliance, have not yet diminished, it is desirable for us to have a common vision, or roadmap, for the future of the alliance.

New Objectives?

The most important feature of any roadmap is the destination. The primary objective of the ROK–U.S. security alliance has been the deterrence of North Korean armed attack against South Korea. By doing so, it has contributed to regional peace and security in the Pacific area.

But what if North Korean threats diminished? What would be the rationale of the alliance? Many have answered that it should be transformed into a regional alliance to meet new security challenges in the Pacific area: a geographical expansion of the scope of the alliance without a redefinition of its concept of security.

New types of security challenges that transcend geographical boundaries have appeared in the past few years. These challenges include not only terror and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) but also so-called nonconventional security issues—such as human and environmental security, drug trafficking, organized crime, and piracy—that require regional and international cooperation. The development of communication/computer technologies

will become more involved with regional and global issues in various fields. These concerns and issues require coordinated collective responses/approaches among allies with common responsibilities and visions. Thus, the alliance should be transformed and upgraded to a comprehensive security alliance.

From Geography-based to Issue-based. Twenty-first-century security challenges are not confined within geographical boundaries. Few will be immune from what happens in other parts of the world. The limit of cooperation among allies should be based on the nature and scope of emerging issues rather than geography. While the alliance is mainly limited to the Korean Peninsula in particular and the Pacific area in general, this does not need to be the case in the future.

The ROK contribution and assistance to East Timor, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Western Sahara are just a few examples. ROK capabilities are still limited, however, and are primarily tied up with North Korean issues. As these capabilities are enhanced and North Korean threats diminish, the Republic of Korea can and will go beyond current geographic parameters. Such an approach will make the future ROK–U.S. alliance more flexible and responsive to emerging security concerns.

From Threat-driven to Profit-generating. The alliance has been working effectively to cope with North Korean military threats. The primary rationale of the alliance is to deter North Korean armed attack vis-à-vis South Korea. By doing so, it has contributed to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia.

But what if North Korean threats do not exist, or do not constitute a major concern? What if there is no identifiable clear and present threat? Instead of reacting to threats, the future alliance must be directed toward a profit-generating alliance by creating and maintaining a stable regional strategic landscape under which the national interests of both countries will be protected and promoted. Leading the strategic landscape will be much more profitable than following it.

From Reactive to Proactive. While threat-driven alliances tend to be reactive, profit-generating alliances are more likely to be proactive in nature. Rather than being subject to the environment, the alliance should lead the environment. In other words,

Northeast Asia and Southwest Asia to “building a portfolio of capabilities that is robust across the spectrum of possible force requirements, both functional and geographical”; in short, a capabilities-based force.⁵

The *QDR Report* calls for “new combinations of immediately employable forward stationed and deployed forces . . . and rapidly deployable, highly lethal forces that may come from outside a theater of operations,” having the potential to be a “significant force multiplier.” The objective is to create a force that can incorporate “globally distributed capabilities to rapidly strike with precision.”⁶

Overall, the picture is that of an interactive, dynamic network of military capabilities able to deploy anywhere at any time. Incorporated in a concentric picture are permanent military “hubs” on U.S. territory, such as Guam, or on the territory of reliable allies. However, the current network of large overseas bases will be thinned out in favor of smaller ones and “forward operating locations” that can serve as staging areas for rapid deployment. Prepositioning of equipment along major sea lines will also be an integral part of the operational picture.

Multifaceted Threat

That this conception of transformation poses a direct challenge to business as usual in Korea could not be clearer. Secretary Rumsfeld has repeatedly expressed his concerns with respect to forward deployments in Europe and Asia that date back to the Cold War era. He has also observed that the United States still has “a lot of forces in Korea, arranged very far forward . . . where they really aren’t very flexible or usable for other things.” At the same time, he has expressed confidence that South Korea “has all the capability in the world of providing the up-front deterrent that is needed”; meanwhile, the U.S. comparative advantage rests in its reinforcement capabilities via air or sea hubs.⁷

The threats posed by North Korea, however, have not stood still. For the United States, North Korea poses multiple security challenges, both on and off the peninsula.

North Korea is a declining state, with attendant risks extending across a broad spectrum from implosion to explosion. Clearly, the exposure of the greater Seoul metropolitan area to large, forward-deployed

North Korean ground forces remains a paramount problem for the United States and South Korea in any escalation scenario. North Korea is also a state engaged in the development of weapons of mass destruction and their proliferation. During his February 13, 2003, appearance before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Secretary Rumsfeld argued that the challenge posed by North Korea was more as a proliferator than as a nuclear threat on the peninsula.

Faced with a multifaceted threat, the United States and South Korea have little choice but to prepare for multiple contingencies. In the context of the National Security

faced with a multifaceted threat, the United States and South Korea have little choice but to prepare for multiple contingencies

Strategy and the *QDR Report*, U.S. forces on the peninsula are to assume a multitask role: to maintain deterrence on the peninsula and to be prepared to deploy off the peninsula in the global war on terrorism. At the same time, South Korea is to assume a greater role in its own defense.

This division of labor is not really new. Indeed, it comports with a long-term alliance objective, dating at least to 1991, of transitioning South Korea to a leading role with respect to security on the peninsula. Even so, since early 2003, the United States has begun to push forward on specific initiatives. The Future of the Alliance Policy Initiative, launched in December 2002, has as its major components the pullback of the 2^d Infantry Division from the demilitarized zone (DMZ) to locations south of Seoul, and relocation of the United States Forces, Korea, headquarters from the Yongsan base in the heart of Seoul.

South Korea already has the vast majority of forward defense between Seoul and the DMZ. At the same time, the United States

announced an \$11 billion investment in over 150 military enhancements on the peninsula, including the deployment of unmanned aerial vehicles, command and control upgrades, and mobility improvements.

Alliance Implications

Without question, the political context for these moves is not very auspicious. The ROK body politic is deeply divided over the terms of engagement with Pyongyang and the worth of continued reliance upon America for security. This view is balanced by a recognition of the importance of the alliance to South Korea’s economic prosperity—in particular, foreign investor confidence—and, among a strong silent majority of alliance supporters, a recognition of the threat still posed by North Korea. Over the longer term, however, the four pluses of transformation discussed below should outweigh any negatives.

First, U.S.-led transformation should not be a threat to alliance solidarity. Done right, in fact, it will reinforce deterrence and strengthen the military effectiveness of the alliance in performing a range of vital tasks. It will do so by maximizing the unique capabilities that the United States can bring into play with respect to the peninsula while maximizing the conventional strength of South Korea. As the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has explained with respect to transformation on the peninsula, “no change will make the capability . . . in South Korea less than it is today; it will only improve it.”⁸ Also, in a speech delivered in Singapore, the Deputy Secretary of Defense explained that the purpose of transformation was to “take advantage of new technology to counter North Korean asymmetric capabilities and to strengthen deterrence.”⁹

The focus of transformation is not more people, and it is not numbers as a measure of commitment. Rather, the focus of transformation is *capabilities*. It is about technology and organization. Both Iraq and Afghanistan have witnessed the transforming changes in warfare. As a result, forces on the Korean Peninsula can be enhanced and capabilities brought to bear that will serve to strengthen deterrence, even as adjustments are made as to how forces are deployed and arranged.

Much of the concern voiced early on in South Korea has been over the meaning of a U.S. pullback from the DMZ, in particular over the loss of the trip-wire presence of U.S. forces. This reflects the legacy of Cold War-era security logic. In reality, the U.S. commitment to Korean security is based on a piece of paper: the Mutual Defense Treaty between the

to be proactive, the ROK-U.S. alliance should be foresighted—that is, based upon a shared assessment of strategic trends in which we can identify likely problems and issues together. To do so, we must be able to identify probable causal relations between symptoms and causes. We also should have a clear strategic vision and determination.

Elements of Change

To realize such a comprehensive alliance, there are many things to do on both sides. Overall, a much more sophisticated and well-thought-out approach is required. What elements are required?

Common Vision. The first requirement is a clear strategic vision for the future based on shared values and trust in each other. Currently, there is no common strategic vision between South Korea and the United States, but one is needed. A “joint declaration of the ROK-U.S. alliance for the future” would be worth having as a platform or guideline in thinking of the future alliance.

A joint declaration would provide a clear direction for any discussion or debate. Furthermore, it would promote a better understanding of and a strong support for the alliance among the people of both countries. It would also make clear how we should cooperate on particular issues. Lastly, it would enable us to take the lead in shaping the future security environment.

Threat Assessment. If we have a common vision, the next step is to discover where we stand today and what the possible obstacles are to achieving that vision. In other words, a joint strategic assessment is required. Currently, South Korea and the United States do not share a long-term strategic assessment. But each country has its own long-term strategic outlook. To facilitate coordination of long-term strategic planning, comprehensive strategic assessments that focus on the international environment beyond the peninsula are necessary.

For that purpose, it is necessary to strengthen, or upgrade, strategic dialogue(s) and information/intelligence at both high and working levels. The Security Consultative Meeting and Military Committee Meeting should be the venue for in-depth discussion. Other venues should be used for not only the current issues but also long-term strategic assessment.

Strategic Planning. If we have a common strategic outlook, the next thing we require is appropriate strategic planning that will enable us to cope with possible concerns and anxieties. Currently, the strategic planning focuses on major combat operations. But future security concerns and challenges such as human security issues will be more likely to be *low intensity, of short duration, and subnational* in nature with great consequences for national, regional, and international peace and security. Also, they will require enhanced cooperation and coordination among the allies (or like-minded countries).

To be better equipped to deal with such new challenges, we must expand the scope of strategic planning from full-scale war to operations other than war/low-intensity conflict. This requires *the expansion, rather than shrinking, of the area where military forces are used*. In short, we should go beyond the traditional concept of strategic planning. A greater emphasis on crisis-action planning will take us to a better position where we can achieve more tailored responses to the full range of plausible contingencies.

Force Innovation. To execute such plans and actions, we should have proper available assets. Available assets are suitable for carrying out rather large-scale war and are mainly focused on a possible North Korean attack. South Korea depends heavily on the United States for command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and air and naval components. For South Korea to assume the primary responsibilities in deterring aggression, it must improve its capabilities in those areas.

Immediate requirements to neutralize North Korean threats to the capital area are counterbattery, air-defense systems, and measures/systems to neutralize tanks. Thus, among others, the airborne warning and control systems, Korean Destroyer Experiment III (the next Korean destroyer project), attack helicopter experiment, and surface-to-air experiment programs and equipment need to be acquired as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, greater emphasis should be placed on acquiring more air and naval assets. Key areas of concern must be lift

capability and patrol capability. To go beyond the Korean Peninsula and to make substantive contributions to regional as well as international peace and stability, the ROK navy and air force must acquire longer-range lift and patrol capabilities, along with combat capabilities. Airborne refueling systems and the landing ship project experiment must be seriously considered. In addition, antisubmarine warfare capabilities and mine sweeping operation capabilities must be enhanced.

Restructuring/downsizing ground troops without damaging combat capability will be necessary. Available human resources, or manpower, will decrease due to demographic changes, starting from 2005. It will become difficult to maintain the current force size. Overcoming such a deficiency—shortage of human resources—and having available forces to carry out greater security roles will require careful allocation of resources, utilization of the revolution in military affairs (RMA), and adoption of the principle of reasonable sufficiency.

More specifically, ground forces should become lighter and more mobile with strong combat capability, such as the task-based unit. Redundancy must be minimized in the combat support/service sector.¹⁰

One of the key factors is the issue of interoperability. To work together in the regional and international arenas, interoperability is essential. In the past, South Korea procured weapons from various sources for economic reasons, but this diversification did not ensure that those weapons would be interoperable (as would procurement from a single source).

To overcome criticisms of U.S. practices in weapons procurement, cooperation and collaboration between the two countries in the defense industry sector must be enhanced. Future warfare and other military operations require utilization of information and computer technologies. South Korea is on the cutting edge in information technology and computer technology. Thus, there would be room for cooperation and collaboration between the two countries in the RMA field.

Training and Exercises. If we are to pursue a comprehensive security alliance, many types of operations will require different cooperation from what we have today. Currently, we focus on rather full-scale warfare

Republic of Korea and the United States of America. Failure to honor that commitment on the Korean Peninsula would soon lead to security failures elsewhere as allies would quickly come to question the value of an alliance with the United States. Failure in South Korea would almost certainly be translated into failure in Japan.

Trip-wire thinking also overlooks the reality of an American expatriate population in South Korea numbering close to 75,000. This population of American citizens is overwhelmingly concentrated in the greater Seoul metropolitan area—well within North Korean artillery range. Putting these lives at risk would impose a heavy burden on any President.

Second, transformation will make the alliance more politically sustainable over time. At present, the United States has 41 major installations scattered across the peninsula, making the United States an intrusive presence in the everyday lives of many Koreans. The Yongsan base in Seoul is a demonstrable case in point; its relocation was agreed to in 1990. Consolidating the U.S. presence and reducing unnecessary burdens on both sides will make it less intrusive and, hopefully, less a politically divisive issue.

Third, transformation will move the alliance toward greater equality and maturity. This has long been an objective of both governments, going back at least as far as the East Asia Strategy Initiative, and is clearly an objective of President Roh Moo-hyun. When launched in 1990, this initiative was described as a process in which the United States would transition from a “leading to a supporting role” as ROK military strength “develops and broadens.” The transition to a leading role for South Korea in its own defense was defined as “an essential element” of U.S. long-term strategy. The initiative foresaw American force reductions and a transfer of responsibilities as well as requisite changes in command structures to accommodate this transition.

Fourth, transformation will enhance opportunities for long-term U.S.–ROK cooperation off the peninsula. The transformation of the American presence, while sustaining deterrence on the peninsula, over time will make it lighter, more mobile, and expeditionary in nature. Increasingly, as it has matured, South Korea has looked toward a greater regional role. Most recently, it

deployed an infantry battalion to East Timor during the United Nations operation there and has supported U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The evolution of the U.S. presence and development of ROK air and naval assets provide a foundation for greater U.S.–ROK cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

Looking Ahead

After an emotionally charged political campaign, which resulted in the election of President Roh, U.S.–ROK relations have

transformation will move the alliance toward greater equality and maturity

again gained traction, particularly with respect to the alliance. Shortly after the election, President Roh made clear his recognition of the importance of the alliance to ROK security and has repeatedly returned to the theme. His visits to U.S. bases, including Yongsan, have underscored the message, and his meeting with President Bush in Washington in May 2003 has set a direction for alliance cooperation.

In this context, this means:

- commitment to the Future of the Alliance Policy Initiative, which is the major vehicle for strengthening the alliance, enhancing deterrence, and shaping the future roles and missions of the alliance partners
- commitment to Yongsan relocation, which is simply long overdue
- development of a strategic vision/roadmap to the future, which will define the roles and missions of the alliance partners both on and off the peninsula.

Transformation and restructuring of the American military presence on the Korean Peninsula cannot take place in a vacuum. What happens on the peninsula will have an

immediate and direct impact on the U.S.–Japan alliance and the forward-deployed forces in Japan. In short, transformation on the peninsula will lead to transformation of the U.S. presence in Japan, which, in turn, will affect the nature of the American presence across the Asia-Pacific region.

Clearly, operational concerns in the war on terrorism must take precedence in the deployment of U.S. forces, but, at the same time from a policy perspective, it must also be recognized that deployments take place in a political and diplomatic context. For the publics of the United States and South Korea, and for the Asia-Pacific region, it is essential to tie processes now transforming the U.S. military and its presence across the globe to regional realities and power balances, as well as to country-specific requirements. What is needed is an East Asia Strategy Initiative for the year 2010.

Notes

¹The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (Washington, DC: The White House, September 17, 2002). See also the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (Washington, DC: The White House, February 2003).

²Department of Defense, Transformation Planning Guidance (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, April 2003).

³Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review Report (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, September 2001), 32.

⁴Ibid., 6, 26.

⁵Ibid., 17.

⁶Ibid., 25–26.

⁷Donald H. Rumsfeld, Pentagon Town Hall Meeting, March 6, 2003.

⁸Richard G. Myers, testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 13, 2003.

⁹Paul D. Wolfowitz, “Sustaining the U.S. Commitment in Asia,” remarks at the International Institute for Security Studies, “Second Asia Security Conference: The Shangri-La Dialogue,” Singapore, May 31, 2003.

training, such as reception, staging, onward movement, and integration, and exercises such as Ulchi Focus Lens. We rarely think of other types of operations, except RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific operations). However, there are issues and concerns in today’s environment that call for less than full-scale warfare yet require use of military forces. If our soldiers are not ready to carry out such missions, any plan is doomed to fail.

Thus, in addition to current joint training and exercises, both countries can and must develop diverse training and exercise programs to meet the emerging security challenges.

Command and Control. In December 1994, peacetime operational control (OPCON) was returned to the ROK joint chiefs of staff. But wartime OPCON is still in the hands of the commander of Combined Forces Command (CFC).² When the defense readiness condition³ changes from IV to III, all ROK forces, except 2nd Army, would be under the control of the CFC commander. Such a structure seems necessary and inevitable to guarantee the success of deterrence under the present condition.

As South Korea becomes capable of realizing “self-reliant defense” and inter-Korean relations improve along with tension/threat reduction, it would be natural to change the command structure from an integrated, or combined, to a parallel one.⁴ This must be accompanied by the strengthening of consultation and coordination mechanisms at various levels. Among others, information/intelligence sharing and estimate mechanisms must be strengthened.

Legal Measures. To provide a stable and favorable condition for continued presence of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula, legal issues such as the Status of Forces Agreement and other related measures—such as the Land Partnership Program and defense burdensharing—must be given greater attention and resolved.

Civic organizations and local authorities in South Korea constantly raise issues in these areas. Much more proactive and preventive actions are necessary. In the meantime, the ROK government must be more active in these areas and assume a mediator’s role. Since these matters are beyond the scope of the Ministry of National Defense alone, it

is worth considering the establishment of an interagency organization in the Prime Minister’s office (Governance Coordination Office) that would handle issues related to the United States Forces, Korea (USFK), presence.

Recasting the USFK. The presence of American forces in Korea represents the U.S. commitment to the defense of South Korea. It has served its primary objective—deterrence of North Korean aggression—well and contributed to economic development of South Korea over the past five decades.

Changing U.S. global strategy and improving ROK defense capabilities should imply changes to the USFK. Until now, the primary USFK function has been the deterrence of North Korean aggression, and its force structure has been tailored to carry out that mission. While USFK force improvement plans are occurring, the USFK still does not have the capacity to carry out the other types of mission already mentioned.

To make the USFK more suitable for regional contingencies, additional lift capabilities—air and naval assets—must be introduced and integrated into the current USFK. Ultimately, the USFK over the longer term should be reshaped to operate more like an expeditionary force suitable for other regional contingencies.

Base Relocation. Relocation, or merging bases, is another area of concern. To conduct missions off the peninsula, forces must be able to deploy and return easily.

Current base locations are not appropriate since they are dispersed and isolated. Accordingly, the United States is advancing a plan to relocate its bases in Korea into two zones, Osan-Pyongtaek and Taegu-Pusan, which are near ports to allow easy ocean access.

However, the relocation of the 2nd Infantry Division has stirred up debate and worries in South Korea. Many South Koreans perceive the relocation of the division as an abandonment of trip-wire deterrence or weakening of the U.S. commitment to the defense of South Korea. One key concern is *decoupling*—that is, there will be no guarantee of a U.S. extended deterrence toward South Korea and no automatic engagement of the United States in the event of North Korean aggression toward South Korea.

From an operational perspective, the relocation of the 2nd Infantry Division would bring about some problems in defending South Korea. For example, it could result in

increased levels of damage in South Korea during wartime, and it could complicate the issue of forming defensive lines and slowing down the transition pace, especially at the early phase of war.

The United States would be wise to pursue the relocation and restructuring of the USFK in close consultation and coordination with its ally rather than unilaterally. Especially, the United States must closely coordinate with ROK force improvement programs. To help eliminate ROK security worries, complementary measures (for example, deploying additional air and naval assets and upgrading lift capabilities of U.S. forces on the mainland) to ensure the reliability and robustness of a combined defense posture must be part of the overall package.

The ROK–U.S. alliance has matured over the past half century. Old challenges, such as North Korea, remain, but the Cold War structure of international relations is now a decade into history. Today, new challenges confront the alliance partners. Meeting the threat of global terrorism and moving the alliance into new roles and missions that comport with its maturity will be required. Transforming the alliance will require the development of a common strategic vision, appropriate strategic planning, requisite force innovation in the ROK military, as well as changes over time in the existing command structure.

Notes

¹The ROK Ministry of National Defense is pursuing “defense reform” to reduce such redundancies and to maximize combat capabilities.

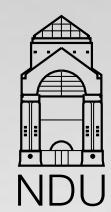
²The CFC commander has the right to ask for the transfer of control over necessary ROK forces through Combined Delegated Authority.

³Changes in the defense readiness condition are supposed to be consulted and agreed between the two countries’ defense secretaries.

⁴The United Nations Command should be dissolved if peace replaces the current Armistice Agreement. Until that time, the command should be preserved.

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